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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000658

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [SOCI](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: TEACHERS CALL NEW CONTRACT "IDEOLOGICAL"

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,  
REASONS 1.4 (D)

11. (C) Summary: The Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) reached agreement with three teachers' unions (but excluded six other unions) to sign a collective bargaining agreement May 12. The agreement provides for a 15% raise, but changes the teacher evaluation system and makes training workshops obligatory. Teachers, parents and opposition leaders have denounced the new contract and joined in a May 20 opposition protest that attracted several thousand participants. The Chavez administration has met resistance in the past to attempts to politicize the education system, backing off from proposed, ideologically-charged changes. Nevertheless, some pundits are betting that an emboldened Chavez will soon seek passage of a stalled Education Law in an effort to make Venezuela's educational system conform to his socialist agenda. End Summary.

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Choosing the Unions  
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12. (C) President Chavez announced that the GBRV reached agreement on a national teachers' contract during a May 12 nationally televised speech ("cadena"). Chavez stressed that this contract raises teacher salaries by 15% for 2009. Inflation is running close to 30%. Unlike previous teacher contracts, the pay increase is not retroactive to the end of the last contract, which expired in 2007. Salary increases for 2010 are left to the discretion of President Chavez. Three unions were part of these negotiations: the National Union of the United Teaching Force (Sinafum), the Educators Federation of Venezuela (FEV), and the Venezuelan Teachers Federation (FVM), while six other unions were not part of the discussions. Minister of Education Hector Navarro said that only the three unions with which the GBRV engaged are legitimate. The other teachers' unions called for a strike during the negotiations on March 25. Navarro termed the strike illegal as negotiations were ongoing and threatened participants with punishment. The strike did not appear to generate significant participation.

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Evaluations, Workshops and Ideology  
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13. (C) Critics of the contract say that it includes changes that were voted down during the December 2, 2007, constitutional referendum. The contract makes the teacher evaluation system more ad-hoc and could potentially be used to give pro-Chavez teachers preferential treatment. It also

requires regular attendance at "teaching, humanistic, and technical training," which critics believe will actually be ideological workshops. The Catholic Church, which receives public money for its religious education, is very critical of the contract. Vice President of the Venezuelan Conference of Bishops Baltazar Porras said it forces teachers to be ideological mouthpieces. Answering accusations that the GBRV wants to politicize education, Sinafum president Orlando Perez "clarified" to the local media that they "are not trying to teach students ideology, but just want to teach them that the imperialists are trying to impose their own culture and dispossess them of their wealth."

¶4. (C) FVM President Orlando Alzuru told Poloff May 21 that the original contract proposed by the government was very ideological, but that the negotiated contract is not. "People are criticizing us for participating in the negotiations," he said, "but without our changes the contract would be much worse." FVM is the largest teacher's union in the country, representing 82,000 of the 350,000 teachers in the country.

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The New Education Law  
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¶5. (C) President Chavez regularly raises the idea of changing the education system to conform with his socialist revolution. The most direct way to change the system would be to pass the new Education Law, a project that has been pending for several years. A National Teacher's Movement Meeting held May 14-17 worked on a report to inform the second reading of the New Education Law. (Note: The National Assembly must approve draft laws in two readings before passing them to the Executive Branch for promulgation into

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law. End Note). FVM President Orlando Alzuru told the local media May 16 that the contract was not so bad, but that "the real danger is in the discussion of the New Education Law". He told Poloff that he thinks the GBRV will dust off and re-open deliberations on the draft, new Education Law soon.

¶6. (C) Comment: President Chavez has repeatedly called for a socialist curriculum to develop socialist citizens. Despite local rumors of Cuban educational advisors and anti-capitalist and xenophobic additions to the curriculum, few significant nationwide curriculum changes appear to have occurred so far. Teachers and parents have mobilized in the past and successfully stalled previous efforts at wholesale change of the education system. Many pundits believe education remains a "third rail" issue for the GBRV. Nevertheless, the GBRV may feel empowered to pursue education reform again in the wake of Chavez's victory in the February 15 referendum eliminating term limits. If resistance to the new contract dies down, the GBRV may try to pass more significant and ideologically charged changes via the Education Law. End Comment.

CAULFIELD